



Kiswahili in 11 countries

# Kiswahili

## Why is Kiswahili special?

Kiswahili is unique. It deserves all of the attention that it gets. This item in our series is to say why that is, and to say why South Africans should take an interest in the Kiswahili language and its history. Kiswahili can show South African languages the way forward. Kiswahili is a success.

Kiswahili is spoken in 11 countries and has official status in 5 of them: Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Union of the Comoros (where it is known as Comorian). The other countries with first-language Swahili-speaking populations are: Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. In most of these countries there are much larger populations of second-language Kiswahili-speakers, who make use of the special, useful and convenient characteristics of this great language.

As we will see in the next item, only four other languages have comparable international reach in Africa, and they are all languages that originated outside the continent. They are Arabic, Portuguese, French and English.

Of the hundreds of indigenous African languages, only Kiswahili has been able to grow in the modern period to compete with the former colonial languages. This is why we can say it is unique and that it shows the way forward for other African languages.

### **Kiswahili is a modern language**

The rise of Kiswahili has taken place in modern times. Kiswahili is contemporary in this respect to three other languages that have established themselves in the modern world: Modern Hebrew, Standard Modern Greek and Afrikaans. All of these four languages have ancient origins, but became what they are today in a deliberate phase of modern development starting in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and consolidating in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

### **Kiswahili has many dictionaries**

As far as we can ascertain, Kiswahili first broke through the missionary barrier in 1981 with the publication of the “Kamusi ya Kiswahili sanifu” (Standard Kiswahili Dictionary) in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. This dictionary has been revised and re-published at least 43 times to date. It can also be downloaded from the Internet.

The publication of “Kamusi ya Kiswahili sanifu”, known as KKS, was met with great pride and joy by Kiswahili speakers everywhere. It has been followed by many more monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries, some of them derived from the KKS and others being substantially new projects. One publisher alone offers five different monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries (see [here](#)).

## **Kiswahili has literature**

Kiswahili-language publications are abundant in all aspects of literature from school and university books, to newspapers and magazines, to poetry and novels and comics. Swahili language appears in drama and in song.

## **Kiswahili is still growing**

Because Kiswahili is a living language, with speakers, writers, readers and dictionaries, it is able to expand its vocabulary and its usages to accommodate modern life as it develops.

## **Kiswahili by comparison**

There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of indigenous languages spoken in Africa. Many of them are well known. We can mention Ovambo, Luba and Lingala, Yoruba, Wolof and Ashanti, Baganda, Luo, Masai and Kikuyu, and many Central and Southern African Languages including the nine indigenous official languages of South Africa.

In none of these cases does it appear, as it does with Kiswahili, that the major problems have been solved. On the contrary, in all cases it appears that the commanding heights of the literary and most conspicuously, political world are generally occupied by the four principal former colonial languages: Arabic, Portuguese, French and English.

Projecting forward, it is hard to see how the indigenous African languages will avoid a decline, or find a turning-point in that decline. It is only with Kiswahili that we can see anything like an international challenge to the former colonial tongues. That challenge rests upon the vigour of scholarship and on its products, the monolingual Kiswahili dictionaries, and upon the literary culture that is in turn buttressed by the existence of monolingual dictionaries.

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